

CITIZEN JOURNALIST

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ABSTRACT

A few Years back we used to get news through Newspapers, Radio and Television. Professional Journalists would go places to get stories, photographs and videos of situations and events. Some stories which affected us, some were part of our normal routine. Some stories which we use to wish to tell masses, but we rarely, if ever, get a chance to share with others. However over the last few years everything has changed. Thanks to new tools like weblogs and smart Phones, it is now possible to easily publish to the Internet. From North Pole to South Pole, everyday people like you and me are starting to share their stories and opinions with the rest of the world. We become a new-age media, actively participating and exploring stories. We are citizen Journalists.

KEYWORDS: Media, Citizen, Journalist, Internet, Blogs

INTRODUCTION

A vibrant online community of citizen journalists in Assam reports from remote areas. Citizen journalists regularly report for the website and are granted identity cards to help cover big events. Webmaster Babul Gogoi has been holding workshops to train people from various walks of life in citizen journalism so that they too can report news from their areas. He has particularly focused on those areas of Assam from where reports are scant in newspapers and TV channels based out of the capital city, Guwahati.

“We now have a fleet of 200 such citizen journalists registered with us and are regularly giving us news from areas, which do not usually have newspaper and TV correspondents,” says Gogoi. These reporters are directly or indirectly associated with the news they send. “If they tag any news as breaking news, I ensure it is actually so,” he says.

Citizen journalists regularly reporting for the website are granted identity cards “to help cover big events like ministers' visits to their areas.” Based on this card, he says with a laugh, “some have been made members of the Guwahati Press Club.” What was the purpose of starting this portal—Gogoi explains, people have stories, issues which they want to take up with the administration or share.. These need not be just negative stories, but give a platform for people like you and me, to deal with situations.

Thinking up newer ways to make use of technology, Gogoi had the brainwave to start assamtimes.org in 2007. “As a webmaster for another Assam-based portal, I used to receive a lot of local news besides Assam-related cultural/social news from across the world. So I thought, why not create a site only to publicise local news online.”

In future, he plans to print an annual journal with articles on new ideas to address some issues related to the Northeast. “The target readers will be policymakers, bureaucrats, ministers, academics, politicians, development workers, journalists and research students.”

This is how a citizen is using the internet to have his say and get his voice heard by authorities. These are citizen Journalists. The term 'citizen media' refers to forms of content produced by private citizens, who are otherwise not professional journalists. Citizen journalism, participatory media and democratic media are related principles.

PRINCIPLES OF CITIZEN MEDIA

'Citizen media' is a term coined by Clemencia Rodriguez, who defined this concept as 'the transformative processes they bring about within participants and their communities.' Citizen media refers to the ways in which audiences can also become participants in the media, using the different resources offered. In the modern age, new technologies have brought about different media technologies, which became the ground for citizen participation.

There are many forms of citizen-produced media, including blogs, vlogs, podcasts, digital storytelling, community radio, participatory video and more, and may be distributed via television, radio, internet, email, movie theatre, DVD and many other forms. Many organizations and institutions exist to facilitate the production of media by private citizens including, but not limited to, public, educational, and government access (PEG) cable tv channels, Independent Media Centers and community technology centers.

Citizen media has bloomed with the advent of technological tools and systems that facilitate production and distribution of media. Of these technologies, none has advanced citizen media more than the Internet. With the birth of the Internet and into the 1990s, citizen media has responded to traditional mass media's neglect of public interest and partisan portrayal of news and world events. Media produced by private citizens may be as factual, satirical, and neutral or biased as any other form of media but has no political, social or corporate affiliation.

By 2007, the success of small, independent, private journalists began to rival corporate mass media in terms of audience and distribution. Citizen-produced media has earned higher status and public credibility since the 2004 US Presidential elections and has since been widely replicated by corporate marketing and political campaigning. Traditional news outlets and commercial media giants have experienced declines in profit and revenue, which can be directly attributed to the wider acceptance of citizen-produced media as an official source of information.

Many people prefer the term 'participatory media' to 'citizen media' as citizen has a necessary relation to a concept of the nation-state. The fact that many millions of people are considered stateless and often without citizenship limits the concept to those recognised only by governments. Additionally the very global nature of many participatory media initiatives, such as the Independent Media Center, makes talking of journalism in relation to a particular nation-state largely redundant as its production and dissemination do not recognise national boundaries.

A different way of understanding Citizen Media emerged from cultural studies and the observations made from within this theoretical frame work about how the circuit of mass communication was never complete and always contested, since the personal, political, and emotional meanings and investments that the audience made in the mass-distributed products of popular culture were frequently at odds with the intended meanings of their producers.

EMERGENCE OF CITIZEN MEDIA

If democracy is the engine that drives a society, then media must be the dashboard that indicates its health. However, the problem with Indian media is that the check engine light doesn't seem to work. It tells us that the engine is

running, but does not warn us of any underlying problems. The end result is of course a complete breakdown with very high repair bills.

The primary role of media is not to amuse or entertain people, but to inform and educate them. The fourth estate was not protected by the constitution to partner with the other three, but instead to monitor and indicate their weaknesses to the society. Unfortunately, our media has failed to perform its basic function, which is to serve its "beneficiaries" - the people of India.

Citizen journalism, as a form of alternative media, presents a "radical challenge to the professionalized and institutionalized practices of the mainstream media" According to Terry Flew, there have been three elements critical to the rise of citizen journalism: open publishing, collaborative editing, and distributed content. Mark Glaser, a freelance journalist, who frequently writes on new media issues, said in 2006:

"The idea behind citizen journalism is that people without professional journalism training can use the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the Internet to create, augment or fact-check media on their own or in collaboration with others. For example, you might write about a city council meeting on your blog or in an online forum. Or you could fact-check a newspaper article from the mainstream media and point out factual errors or bias on your blog. Or you might snap a digital photo of a newsworthy event happening in your town and post it online. Or you might videotape a similar event and post it on a site such as YouTube."

The accessibility of online media has also enhanced the interest for journalism among youth and many websites, like 'Far and Wide' a publication focusing on travel and international culture, as well as WorldWeekly a news blog covering a range of topics from world politics to science, are founded and run by students.

HISTORY

The idea that average citizens can engage in the act of journalism has a long history in the United States. The modern citizen journalist movement emerged after journalists themselves began to question the predictability of their coverage of such events as the 1988 U.S. presidential election. Those journalists became part of the public, or civic, journalism movement, a countermeasure against the eroding trust in the news media and widespread public disillusionment with politics and civic affairs.

Initially, discussions of public journalism focused on promoting journalism that was "for the people" by changing the way professional reporters did their work. According to Leonard Witt, however, early public journalism efforts were "often part of 'special projects' that were expensive, time-consuming, and episodic. Too often these projects dealt with an issue and moved on. Professional journalists were driving the discussion. They would have the goal of doing a story on welfare-to-work (or the environment, or traffic problems, or the economy), and then they would recruit a cross-section of citizens and chronicle their points of view. Since not all reporters and editors bought into this form of public journalism, and some outright opposed it, reaching out to the people from the newsroom was never an easy task." By 2003, in fact, the movement seemed to be petering out, with the Pew Center for Civic Journalism closing its doors. With today's technology the citizen journalist movement has found new life as the average person can capture news and distribute it globally.

As Yochai Benkler has noted, "the capacity to make meaning – to encode and decode humanly meaningful statements – and the capacity to communicate one's meaning around the world, are held by, or readily available to, at least

many hundreds of millions of users around the globe.” Professor Mary-Rose Papandrea, a constitutional law professor at Boston College, notes in her article, Citizen Journalism and the Reporter’s Privilege, that: [i]n many ways, the definition of “journalist” has now come full circle.

When the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution was adopted, “freedom of the press” referred quite literally to the freedom to publish using a printing press, rather than the freedom of organized entities engaged in the publishing business. The printers of 1775 did not exclusively publish newspapers; instead, in order to survive financially they dedicated most of their efforts printing materials for paying clients. The newspapers and pamphlets of the American Revolutionary era were predominantly partisan and became even more so through the turn of the century. They engaged in little news gathering and instead were predominantly vehicles for opinion.

The passage of the term “journalism” into common usage in the 1830s occurred at roughly the same time that newspapers, using high speed rotary steam presses, began mass circulation throughout the eastern United States. Using the printing press, newspapers could distribute exact copies to large numbers of readers at a low incremental cost. In addition, the rapidly increasing demand for advertising for brand-name products fueled the creation of publications subsidized, in large part, by advertising revenue. It was not until the late nineteenth century that the concept of the “press” metamorphosed into a description of individuals and companies engaged in an often-competitive commercial media enterprise.

MODES OF CITIZEN MEDIA

Radio

World Wide Community Radio has been driven by participatory methodologies with rich examples of community radio providing a non-profit community owned, operated and driven model of media. The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in the United States initiated by the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 sets aside some public broadcasting funding for producing electronic television programming. Traditionally, PBS radio affiliates have not made concessions for private citizen programming or production.

In India, radio is shifting from being a government monopoly to a highly-commercialized broadcasting service. Media advocacy groups say the media needs to be “democratized” simultaneously as it moves away from official control. Privatization and total deregulation is not enough if the media becomes irrelevant to the vast majority of Indians. Now, while the policies are being developed, is the time for non-profit groups, educational and research institutions, cooperatives, women's groups, and development organizations to seize the available opportunities created by liberalizing the electronic media.

Television

With the birth of cable television in the 1950s came public interest movements to democratize this new booming industry. Many countries around the world developed legislated means for private citizens to access and use the local cable systems for their own community-initiated purposes. Public Access Television (PEG) in the United States is a government mandated model that provides citizens within a cable franchised municipality to get access to the local Public-access television channels to produce and distribute their own programming. Public-access television programming is community initiated and serves as a platform to meet local needs. Community channels in Canada also provides access for citizens to distribute their own programming content, as well as community television in Australia.

Community technology centers are private non-profit organizations found in the US that serve to increase access and training in technology for social applications. Access to television in remote Indian villages has changed substantially in the past few years. And, community television will have many advantages over print media. Programmes, nearly always in the local languages would deal with local issues involving ordinary people so that villagers (even illiterate ones) and town people understand what they are about. The volunteer appointed by a civil society can organize a debate once in a week on localized issues, which in turn would become topics for programmes on the community television. For example, Byrraju Foundation in collaboration with UNESCO has set up one such initiative -Ankuram community TV.

Internet

Affordable consumer technology and broader access to the internet has created new electronic distribution methods. While the corporate media market enjoyed a long period of monopoly on media distribution, the internet gave birth to countless independent media producers and new avenues for delivering content to viewers.

The technological development of Content Management Systems (CMS) in the late 1990s, which allowed non-technical people to author and publish articles to the internet, spawned the birth of weblogs or blogs, Podcasting (audio blogs), Vlogs (video blogs), collaborative wikis, and web-based bulletin boards and "forums".

Citizen Journalism websites which encourage members of the public to publish news that is relevant to them.

The social development of Independent Media Centers (IMCs) introduced collaborative Citizen media with concepts of consensus decision making, mandatory inclusion of women and minorities, non-corporate control, the anonymous accreditation. IMCs have been founded in over 200 cities all over the world.[citation needed]

Commercial models that use these new methods are being born and acquired by media corporations on a daily basis.

Video

Participatory video is an approach to and medium of participatory or citizen media that has become increasingly popular with the falling cost of film/video production, availability of simple consumer video cameras and other equipment, and ease of distribution via the Internet.

Although videos/films can be produced by a single individual, production often requires a group of participants. And, so participatory film making includes a set of techniques to involve communities/groups in conceptualizing and producing their own films. Chris Lunch, a preeminent contemporary author on participatory video and executive director of Insight, explains that "The idea behind this is that making a video is easy and accessible, and is a great way of bringing people together to explore issues, voice concerns, or simply to be creative and tell stories."

Participatory video was developed in opposition to more traditional documentary film approaches, in which indigenous knowledge and local initiatives are filmed and disseminated by outside professional filmmakers. These professionals, who are often from relatively privileged backgrounds use their artistic license to design narrative stories and interpret the meaning of the images/actions that they film. As such, the film is often created for the benefit of outsiders and those that are filmed rarely benefit from their participation. The objectives of participatory video are to facilitate empowerment, community self-sufficiency, and communication.[6]

The first experiments in PV were the work of Don Snowden, a Canadian who pioneered the idea of using media to enable a people-centered community development approach. Then Director of the Extension Department at Memorial University of Newfoundland, Snowden worked with filmmaker Colin Low and the National Film Board of Canada's Challenge for Change program to apply his ideas in Fogo Island, Newfoundland, a small fishing community.

By watching each other's films, the villagers realized that they shared many of the same concerns and they joined together to create solutions. The villager's films were shared with policy-makers, many of whom had no real conception of the conditions in which Fogo Islanders lived. As a result of this dialogue, policy-makers introduced regulation changes. Snowden went on to apply the Fogo process all over the world until his death in India in 1984.[9] Since then, most of the development of the participatory video technique has been led by non-academic practitioners in the United Kingdom, France, Australia, and Canada.

In India CNN-IBN began a revolution when it introduced the country to the concept of 'Citizen Journalism'. It encouraged people to not simply imbibe the news, but become an intrinsic part of the news gathering process. Since then, scores of people have sent in videos, photographs and posted blogs to report on a variety of issues and from across the country.

Participatory videos are distributed online and offline. Online, they are uploaded and shared through v logs, social software, and video publishing sites.

RELATIONSHIP TO LOCAL JOURNALISM

Some major news reporting agencies, threatened by the speed with which news is reported and delivered by citizen journalism, have launched campaigns to bring in readers and financial support. For example, Bill Johnson, president of Embarcadero Media, which publishes several northern California newspapers, issued an online statement asking readers to subscribe to local newspapers in order to keep them financially solvent. Johnson put special emphasis on the critical role played by local newspapers, which, he argues, "reflect the values of the residents and businesses, challenge assumptions, and shine a light on our imperfections and aspirations." Over the years, tribal India has benefited because of citizen journalism in several ways. This is one part of India which desperately seeks a hand for help and needs to voice itself. Hence, citizen journalism finds its way as an alternative outlet to help tribals raise their voice against the local problems and disparities that they find hard to talk about otherwise.

There are numerous initiatives taken up by citizen journalists in their communities. The story of Shubhramshu Choudhary and the 'Voice of Chhattisgarh' is an example. Choudhary is a former BBC journalist and founder of CGnet Swara – a democratic tool of India. It is a system developed with the help of Microsoft Research India to allow people to use mobile phones to send and listen to audio reports in their local language. Choudhary has created a boom in the tribal land of Chhattisgarh by creating a technology to help and increase global reach by virtue of its websites and training professional journalists at the same time. CGnet Swara is transforming the shape of India in terms of communicating, sharing and receiving news.

CRITICISMS

Objectivity

Citizen journalists also may be activists within the communities they write about. This has drawn some criticism from traditional media institutions such as The New York Times, which have accused proponents of public journalism of

abandoning the traditional goal of objectivity. Many traditional journalists view citizen journalism with some skepticism, believing that only trained journalists can understand the exactitude and ethics involved in reporting news. See, e.g., Nicholas Lemann, Vincent Maher, and Tom Grubisich.

An academic paper by Vincent Maher, the head of the New Media Lab at Rhodes University, outlined several weaknesses in the claims made by citizen journalists, in terms of the "three deadly E's", referring to ethics, economics, and epistemology. The paper has been criticized in the press and blogosphere.

Quality

An article in 2005 by Tom Grubisich reviewed ten new citizen journalism sites and found many of them lacking in quality and content. Grubisich followed up a year later with, "Potemkin Village Redux." He found that the best sites had improved editorially and were even nearing profitability, but only by not expensing editorial costs. Also according to the article, the sites with the weakest editorial content were able to expand aggressively because they had stronger financial resources.

Another article published on Pressthink examined Backfence, a citizen journalism site with three initial locations in the D.C. area, which reveals that the site has only attracted limited citizen contributions. The author concludes that, "in fact, clicking through Backfence's pages feels like frontier land — remote, often lonely, zoned for people but not home to any. The site recently launched for Arlington, Virginia. However, without more settlers, Backfence may wind up creating more ghost towns."

David Simon, a former Baltimore Sun reporter and writer-producer of the popular television series, "The Wire," criticized the concept of citizen journalism—claiming that unpaid bloggers who write as a hobby cannot replace trained, professional, seasoned journalists.

"I am offended to think that anyone, anywhere believes American institutions as insulated, self-preserving and self-justifying as police departments, school systems, legislatures and chief executives can be held to gathered facts by amateurs pursuing the task without compensation, training or for that matter, sufficient standing to make public officials even care to whom it is they are lying to."

An editorial published by The Digital Journalist web magazine expressed a similar position, advocating to abolish the term "citizen journalist", and replacing it with "citizen news gatherer". "Professional journalists cover fires, floods, crime, the legislature, and the White House every day. There is either a fire line or police line, or security, or the Secret Service who allow them to pass upon displaying credentials vetted by the departments or agencies concerned. A citizen journalist, an amateur, will always be on the outside of those lines. Imagine the White House throwing open its gates to admit everybody with a camera phone to a presidential event." "While the fact that citizen journalists can report in real time and are not subject to oversight opens them to criticism about the accuracy of their reporting, news stories presented by mainstream media also misreport facts occasionally that are reported correctly by citizen journalists."

The credibility of mainstream media is at an all-time low with Yellow Journalism. People have started to take notice and are looking for alternatives. There are issues at the grassroots level which get conveniently ignored by the mainstream. People are still interested in these reports and reports that are well researched and expose scams. This often leads to people taking matters in to their own hands. There are numerous examples of RTI activists, freelance journalists and sometimes a common man coming in to bridge this gap.

Proponents of traditional media, often professional journalists, ridicule citizen journalism saying it lacks "quality" and "professional reporting". I don't agree as I don't see much difference between citizen journalism and traditional reporting. A community collectively is much smarter than the so called individual "professionals".

A community driven website does however need to go that extra mile to ensure quality is maintained. There needs to be a layer that filters out spam and rejects irrelevant content. They need to work with their contributors to bring the write-ups up to a standards and at the same time be careful enough to not tamper with the original idea or content in any way. In media an Administrators role is often confused with that of an Editor.

I'm not proposing that citizen journalism will replace traditional journalism anytime soon. But it is indeed an effective alternative medium that is filling the ever widening gap.

Legal Repercussions

Edward Greenberg, a New York City litigator notes higher vulnerability of unprofessional journalists in court compared to the professional ones:

"So-called shield laws, which protect reporters from revealing sources, vary from state to state. On occasion, the protection is dependent on whether the person [who] asserted the claim is in fact a journalist. There are many cases at both the state and federal levels where judges determine just who is/is not a journalist. Cases involving libel often hinge on whether the actor was or was not a member of the "press"."

CONCLUSIONS

Where we cannot ignore benefits of Citizen Journalism, its downsides too cannot be overlooked. There is a process of verification called gatekeeping in mainstream media that can weed out factual errors and biases. It's nearly impossible to impose gatekeeping in social media. But as far as Citizen Journalism news portals, and television and print organisations inviting Citizen Journalism content are concerned, they must implement gatekeeping for the Citizen Journalism submissions so as to do away with false or offensive content. This will help ensure the news updates by Citizen Journalists are in conformity with journalistic ethics.

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